



blow out the candles (i'll be wishing for you, too) by everybreatheverymove

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Summary: (Prompt: Birthday.) "Make a wish," Mike says, right corner of his lips turning up to form a crooked smile. It's endearing and soft, and El wonders — for all of maybe four seconds because that's all the time she'll allow herself — what she's going to wish for. (You. Home, she thinks.)

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It's just the two of them.

El had asked if she could spend her birthday with Mike this year — alone, without supervision.

She'd spent her fourteenth birthday — her first outside of the confinements of the cabin, only her second out in the open world — with the Party. They'd been at the Byers, Hop saying it was the only other safe space for her to be that wasn't home. She hadn't minded, though. There'd been balloons and streamers and Dustin had found a small box of fireworks in his cellar that they'd set off in the backyard.

Her fifteenth, she'd been with the Byers. A smaller affair, given the circumstances, but of no less importance to her. They sang "*Happy Birthday*" over dinner, Joyce wrote her a heartfelt letter that she now keeps buried in a box under her bed along with Hop's, and Jonathan and Will pooled together to get her a gift she wouldn't soon forget. She'd spent a whole two hours talking to Mike on the phone that morning, and that night.

But this time around, El had wanted something different, something new but all the while familiar to her. After a little over a year away, she'd been aching for a return to normalcy, familiarity.

Not that living with her newfound adoptive family hadn't been nice, wasn't homely in its own way. But something had always felt off, askew; like they were all just sat waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something big to happen that would send them catapulting all the way back to Indiana.

(A week after moving back, she realized that it was Hawkins she'd been missing all along. No matter what troubles or tragedies occurred there, no matter what scars she still retained, it would always be the first place she felt safe, human, the first place she could call home. Hawkins would always be the one place she had felt accepted — all she'd ever needed was her family and friends and Mike.)

And then, one afternoon, when she'd been hanging out at Max's place

and flicking through teen magazines — the redhead too preoccupied with trying to fix her broken stereo — El had stumbled upon an article about how a girl's sixteenth birthday should be 'sweet', special. She hadn't thought much of it at first, but when she brought it up to Max, the other girl had simply rolled her eyes and offered, *"Just... don't do anything stupid. And don't let Mike do anything stupid either. You know what boys are like."*

(El hadn't known what she meant, but she'd nodded anyway.)

Her sixteenth birthday had only been a week away at the time, after all. And, while she'd considered Max's advice, she also couldn't imagine a more special way of spending it than with her boyfriend, hoping that maybe Mike just might be the key to unlocking her tightly-wound heart.

(She'd been in pain for some time, troubled by loss and grief, and then thwarted by hope when it came crawling back to her in the shape of her guardian, of her Hop — limping, balding and weakened.)

(But that small miracle hadn't stopped the constricting, tightening feeling that crept around her neck at night, or the suffocating nightmares she dreamt up in the dark. The loss of a parent, the move away from the only place she'd ever been able to call home, and then the return of both things at once.

She needed to settle, to breathe for just a day, and she'd been hoping that Mike could be her respirator.

Hopper agreed, after much deliberation — and many tantrums on El's behalf.

Joyce made the cake from scratch two days ago, having asked El which flavors she preferred and which color frosting she'd want. And then it hadn't taken longer than a minute for the woman to just shake her head, wipe her hands down the sides of her worn jeans and pick up the keys from the bowl beside the door. *"Let's go find Karen,"* she'd said, practically dragging El, one shoe hanging off her foot, out the door with a smile.

So now, here she is.

Sat in the Wheeler's basement, two movies deep into a John Hughes marathon, a beautifully simple bracelet — teddy and snowflake charms hanging limp from the metal — resting around her perfectly dainty wrist and tucked in beneath her hairband, gifted to her by the boy whose hands are on his hips as he's watching her in awe.

She looks up at Mike suddenly, quirking a brow when he gestures towards the table in the middle of the room, bouncing up and down on his heels, almost impatiently.

There's some overplayed classic rock track playing low on the speaker by the couch — she thinks it's one of Mike's favorites, one of many songs she'd asked Jonathan to copy onto a tape for her when they'd moved away. There's a girly, pink-frosted round cake adorned with edible flowers and plain white candles sat waiting for her in the middle table where Mike has just placed it.

He grins, extends a hand, "Cake?"

With a smile, El takes his hand. She threads her fingers through his own and lets him lead her over to the edge of the table. Glancing around, she furrows her brows in confusion, "where do we... sit?"

All the chairs were removed from under the table a couple of hours ago; they're now pillars of the makeshift fort they'd set up in front of the television, sheets tossed over the backs of the wooden seats and hanging in the air.

"Well," Mike starts, and he lets go of her hand to run it along the back of his neck then, a soft blush rising to his cheeks as his gaze dips. He thumps his free hand on the table's surface, twice, lips parting and smoothing his tongue along the bottom one, "Up here."

Her eyebrows rise up to her hairline then, a delighted smile taking over her face, "Like the movie?"

Mike nods, hands running through his dark curls. Without wasting another second, El hops up onto the wooden table. It's old and it creaks sometimes, but she's pretty sure it can bear their weight.

She brushes her hair behind her ears — careful not to budge the butterfly hair clips in her curls — pushing up on her knees, sock-clad heels digging into the backs of her thighs as she extends her own hand out this time. Mike doesn't take it, but he makes swift work of hopping onto the table to join her. He swivels around, making himself more comfortable before he picks up the box of matches beside the cake.

Mike folds his legs up beneath him, bony elbows pressing to the insides of his thighs hard enough for the skin to turn pink. Looking down, he swipes one of the matches from the box and slides it across the striking surface. Mike quickly lights at many of the thin candles as he can with that one match, and then repeats the process until they're all lit.

He blows out the final matchstick, waving it around for a second before depositing back on top of the closed box. His hands drop down to his lap then, palms facing up but fingers intertwining as though to keep himself busy, keep himself from touching anything but her.

(El thinks she might like him to, though. She'd like it if he ran a hand through her hair, even if it meant her butterfly clips coming loose. She'd like it if he held her own hands as she blows out the candles on the cake, softly squeezing her fingers just as the flames die out.)

(Maybe if she asks, he'll kiss her.)

"Happy birthday, El," Mike says, and he's staring over at her now, chestnut eyes burning holes through her soul.

He has one hand lay flat on the tabletop, and El reaches for it. She places her hands atop his, dragging her fingers across his knuckles in a gentle manner.

"Make a wish," he says, right corner of his lips turning up to form a crooked smile. It's endearing and soft, and she wonders — for all of maybe four seconds because that's all the time she'll allow herself — what she's going to wish for.

(Max said she'd wished for a new skateboard, a green one this time — the fancy, expensive one with the flowers drawn along the bottom.

Will told her that he never wished for anything anymore; he'd been let down one too many times and it was no longer worth it. Dustin outright refused to tell anybody what he'd wished for on his last birthday, but El distinctly remembers the smile on his face when he'd opened up a brand new Atari the following day so she's fairly certain he got what he wanted. And Lucas just told her to wish for whatever *she* wanted most, not offering a single suggestion as to what it should be.)

(She appreciated his advice the most.)

Mike had told her his sixteenth birthday wish had been for her to come back to him, in any shape or form, for any amount of time.

(He hadn't told her his thirteenth birthday wish had been the exact same thing.)

She'd moved back to Hawkins several weeks later.

(She likes to think fate — and maybe just a little bit of magic — intervened and played a hand but, really...)

Closing her eyes without another moment's thought, El purses her lips and quickly blows air through her teeth, aiming for all sixteen candles Joyce — or maybe even Karen — has stuck into the top layer of frosting.

There's one candle still lit and burning by the time she finishes, but Mike quickly blows it out before she has time to open her eyes and notice.

He smiles then, big and wide, shoulders hunching forward as though to lean in closer to her as he whispers, "What did you wish for?"

(You.)

(Home.)

El's gaze flickers from the cake up to his face, watching as something she can only describe as adoration — she learned the word last week; Hop said it was like 'love' but *softer* — flashes in his eyes. They darken, focused entirely on her, and El thinks that maybe hers do the

same, turn from honey to chocolate just by looking at him.

The girl smiles, reaching for his right hand with her left and cupping the side of his face in her right, thumbing along his jawline, "For things to stay like this."

"Like this?" Mike frowns.

"Yes." She says, simply, "Me and you, here." She nibbles at her lower lip for a fraction of a second, contemplating her next word, trying it out for size on her tongue. But the way he's looking at her just confirms it, reassures her that everything she could ever possibly want she already *has*, "Home."